Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe

Volume 40 | Issue 2 Article 5

3-2020

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"CONVERTED CO-ETHNICS": ROMANIAN MIGRANTS IN THE NORTHERN SERBIAN PROVIENCE OF VOJVODINA [1]

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Abstract

In this paper, my case study highlights Romanian neo-Protestant migrants from Serbia who either returned to their "home country," or work on different missionary activities among their co-ethnics after the fall of communism. To a large degree, members of the Romanian minority in Serbia belong to the Romanian Orthodox Church, which is the dominant confession, then a smaller number to the Romanian Greek-Catholic church and various neo-Protestant communities, such as the Nazarene, the Adventist, the Baptist, and the Pentecostal community. Starting from the hypothesis that the conversion of the Romanians in Serbia to neo-Protestantism is closely related to issues of migration, whether the conversion occurred while living abroad or they were, for religious reasons, forced to leave the country, the focus of this paper is transformation of social relations among converted Romanians and their co-ethnics. Based on the results from ethnographic research conducted in Serbia in 2014–2015, I will focus on how migrants perceive themselves and their co-ethnic attitudes towards them. Becoming a part of transnational religious community and emphasizing supra-nationality, the Romanian neo-Protestants perceive themselves as a part of "worldwide

[1] This paper was presented at the international workshop *Co-Ethnics as Unwanted Others. Intra-Group Tensions After the Fall of Communism: Causes, Consequences, and Contexts,* held at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Paris, in June 2014. The author expresses her gratitude to Dr. Natalya Kosmarskaya for providing important feedback and comments to the previous versions of this paper.

brotherhood," adopting some new forms of collective identity while distancing themselves from the Romanian Orthodox tradition. Thus, religious otherness raises questions of the attitude of the Romanian local community towards the Romanian neo-Protestant migrants and their new religious, cultural, and social practices.

Keywords: migration from/return to Serbia, Romanian neo-Protestants, conversion, co-ethnic interaction.

1. Introduction

While most studies on migration and return migration limit their focus to economic or political motivations, religion has not been a focus in migration studies until recently. Over the last two decades, sociological and anthropological studies have placed phenomena related to migration, diasporas, labor migrants, religious identity, and transnationalism at the center of their interests.[2] Most publications on religion and migration cover Western Europe and North America,[3] but Eastern and Southeastern Europe remain noticeably invisible in this respect. Research on the issues of religion and migration from Southeastern Europe often include only 'traditional churches' or 'majority religions,' such as Orthodox Christians in the case of Serbia. In recent academic studies on diaspora in Serbia, authors tend to focus on issues related to various ethnic or linguistic identity transformations rather than religious ones.[4] In the author's knowledge, there are no studies that look on migration of religious groups from ethnically diverse areas of Southeastern Europe and their religious activities in their new host societies, or after the return to their homeland. Even though it was not a central topic in migration studies research, religion nowadays represents one of the most important forms of social organization.

In the introduction to the paper on Salvadorian Evangelical and Catholic immigrants in the U.S., Cecilia Menjivar argues, "Giving the importance of religious institutions and preachers in the lives of immigrants past and present scholars have examined religious

[2] Peggy Levitt, "You know, Abraham was really the first immigrant: religion and transnational migration," *International Migration Review*, 37(3), 2003: 847–873; Nina Schiller Glick, Linda Basch, Cristina Blanc Szanton, "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration," *Anthropological Quarterly* 68(1), 1995:48-63. Jacqueline Hagan, Helen Rose Ebaugh, "Calling upon the sacred: Migrants use of Religion in the Migration Process," *International Migration Review* 37(4), 2003: 1145–1162.; Wouter Dumont, "Immigrant religiosity in a pluri-ethnic and pluri-religious metropolis: an initial impetus for a typology," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 18 (3), 2003: 369–384.

[3] Susanne Lachenicht, *Religious Refugees in Europe, Asia and North America* (6th–21th century) (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2007).

[4] Cf. Gordana Blagojević, *Srbi u Kaliforniji. Obredno-religijska praksa i etnicitet vernika srpskih pravoslavnih parohija u Kaliforniji* (Beograd: Etnografski institut SANU, 2005a); Marija Ilić, "Diaspora and diasporic awareness: An analysis of the oral discourse of the Serbs from Szigetcsép in Hungary," *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* 58(2), 2010: 147–162; Miroslava Lukić-Krstanović, Mirjana Pavlović, *Ethnic Symbols and Migration: Serbian Communities in USA and Canada* (Belgrade: Serbian Genealogical Centre, 2016).

participation in terms of its contribution to assimilation as well as to the ability of immigrants to maintain ties to their community of origin."[5] While living abroad, immigrants sometimes gain a new perception of their own religious affiliation, against other faiths. "Migration can thus, in a long-time perspective, implement and redesign the religious traditions, and even bring about independent traditions with distinct characteristics, in contrast to former home tradition."[6] Migration may take many different forms, especially nowadays when mobility is highly present on the global level. People change their religious identities and have various experiences encountering new religious traditions. Different immigrant experiences influence religious affiliations and practices and may lead to significant changes in religious identities of immigrants, such as conversion to other religious traditions. Thus, migration cannot be seen as a one-way process but more often it needs to be observed in transnational and transmigrant perspective.[7]

In this paper, I provide an example of the migration of the ethnic Romanians who belong to several neo-Protestant religious communities in Serbia. Neo-Protestant communities are part of religious minority groups, not legally recognized as religious communities or traditional churches, but rather registered only as confessional groups. The material collected for this paper is a result of empirical research conducted in Serbia, precisely in the northern Serbian Province of Vojvodina (2014–2015). My research was primarily ethnographic, involving participant observation, semi-structured qualitative interviews with pastors and members of several neo-Protestant communities: Nazarene, Pentecostal, Baptist, and Seventh Day Adventist. These communities have been established in the late 19th and beginning of the 20th century in ethnically mixed areas of the former Austria-Hungary. From their early history, neo-Protestants were usually in conflictual relationship with state authorities. This was especially noticeable with the Nazarene community due to their pacifism. In communist Yugoslavia, Nazarenes, Jehovah Witnesses, and Seventh day Adventists were severely persecuted and imprisoned for many years. This caused many emigration waves. Most of my informants emigrated during communist Yugoslavia to Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, and North America between 1960s and 1980s. Due to the ethnically mixed composition of Yugoslavia and its regions, members of different ethnic or religious minority groups have emigrated as well. Belonging to minority religious

[5] Ceclia Menjívar, "Religion and immigration in comparative perspective: Catholic and Evangelical Salvadorans in San Francisco, Washington D.C. and Phoenix," *Sociology of religion* 64(1), 2016: 25

[6] Monica Roman, Zizi Goschin, "Does religion matter? Exploring economic performance differences among Romanian emigrants," *Journal for the Study of Religion and Ideologies* 10(29), 2011:10.

[7] Nina Schiller Glick, Linda Basch, Cristina Blanc Szanton, "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration," *Anthropological Quarterly* 68(1), 1995: 48-63.

groups that had unrecognized and marginalized status in the home country was one of the reasons for migration: namely, escaping religious oppression.

The main research focus was to analyze the relationship between migration, religious conversion, and co-ethnic interaction, focusing on the Romanian neo-Protestant migrants as 'converted' co-ethnics in their local communities. My respondents were from the rural settlements with predominantly Romanian population of northern Serbia (the Banat region); twelve interviews were conducted in Romanian and Serbian language. Only two interviews included Romanian Orthodox members in the same area. Using some interview fragments, I will argue that Romanian neo-Protestant migrants became quite visible at the local level over the last decades (after the fall of communism). This new visibility of minority religious communities is the result of both different state policy towards religion in post-communist Serbia, but also stronger missionary efforts of neo-Protestant communities from abroad.[8] After going abroad, many believers participate actively in missionary activities and help the communities in their home-countries, donating money to build prayer houses or buy church buildings and to acquire religious literature and Bibles. Following years of state repression, persecution, and marginal position, neo-Protestants are building new churches and organizing gatherings of new members through public evangelization meetings, summer camps for youth, and English language courses. This new public expression of neo-Protestant religiosity has had a significant impact on the character of intra-group relationships in various local communities in Serbia. The paper offers an opportunity to look at how religion can produce social distance within a minority–while minorities are often perceived as homogeneous groups. The example of Romanian neo-Protestants migrants is another manifestation of heterogeneity of religious and thus cultural identities within one ethnic group.

2. Romanian Neo-Protestants in Serbia: A Brief Overview

Romanians in Serbia are recognized as a national minority and, according to the 2011 Census, their number is 29,332. After the end of the First World War and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, when the Banat region was divided between the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the Kingdom of Romania, and the Kingdom of Hungary, about 40 villages with Romanian population remained in the part of the Serbian Banat living in ethnically compact, homogeneous villages, or mixed with the Serbs and other ethnic

[8] Angela Ilić, "Church and State relations in present day Serbia," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 24(6), 2004: 8–33. Eileen Barker, "But who is going to win? National and Minority Religions in Post-Communist Society," *Facta Universitatis*, 2(6), 1999: 49–74. Blagojević, *Srbi u Kaliforniji*.

groups.[9] Members of the Romanian ethnic minority to a large degree belong to the Romanian Orthodox Church, which is the dominant confession, then to the Romanian Greek Catholic church, and various neo-Protestant communities of the Nazarene, the Seventh day Adventist, the Baptist, and the Pentecostal community. My case study includes the issue of migration of so called "double minorities" or groups that are simultaneously ethnic and religious minorities. Such are Romanian neo-Protestant migrants in Serbia. Being a "double minority" represents an important element in social stratification and their social position on the two levels: with majority Serbian population and on the other hand with members of their own ethnic group (their co-ethnic Romanians). In the societies where some ethnic groups are often identified according to their confessional identity (Serbs and Romanians as Orthodox, Slovaks as Lutherans, Hungarians as Calvinist, Croats as Catholics), religion becomes one of the main ethnic identity markers and plays a central role in drawing ethno/national boundaries.[10] Thus, transcending the salient barriers of belonging to a particular ethnic community, the Romanian neo-Protestants perceive themselves as part of the "worldwide brotherhood," adopting some new forms of collective identity while distancing themselves from the Romanian Orthodox tradition. Conversion to small religious communities of Protestant origin that are very often labelled as "sects" in the public discourse, confront "desirable" or widely accepted picture of Romanians as Orthodox Christians.

Neo-Protestants started their spreading among Romanians in Austria-Hungary in the late 19th and in the first decades of the 20th century. Among them the oldest communities were the Nazarenes, a pacifist group originating in Switzerland and having Anabaptist and Mennonite roots. Reviving some old Mennonite principles, this emerging religious community emphasized pacifism, the forbearance of oaths and child baptism, and the need to separate themselves from the world. Communities practiced strict discipline, which included prohibitions against drinking alcohol and coffee, smoking, cursing, going to public festivities, and attending religious ceremonies in other churches.[11] The Nazarenes had many converts among various ethnic groups in this area including Christian Orthodox Serbs and Romanians.[12] After the First World War, the spread of the Nazarenes in the newly formed Yugoslav state occupied much political and ecclesiastic attention. They were monitored by state officials, and many reports reveal their growth or decline and the locations of their

[9] Mircea Măran, "Românii din Banatul sârbesc în Occident," *Europa* 2(4), 2009: 11–14.
[10] Aleksandra Đurić Milovanović, *Dvostruke manjine u Srbiji. O posebnostima u religiji etnicitetu Rumuna u Vojvodini* (Beograd: Balkanološki institut SANU, 2015), 309.
[11] Ibid., 2015.
[12] Bojan Aleksov, *Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National–Nazarenes in Hungary and Serbia 1850–1914* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006).

churches (which were usually in private homes).

In the interwar period, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, and Pentecostals also established their first communities. It seemed that attractiveness of neo-Protestant theology was especially present in the ethnically and confessionally mixed areas. These communities were not emphasizing the role of any particular ethnic background, thus addressing their teachings to all ethnic groups. The use of vernacular languages in the religious service, reading the Bible, and emphasis on personal religiosity trough the ritual of adult baptism and conversion had the most significant role in their spreading. However, persecution of the Nazarenes as a pacifist group and in some cases, the Seventh Day Adventists, was one of the major reasons of their migration. The migration flow was even higher during the communist period in Yugoslavia when the position of religious minorities deteriorated.[13]The 1946 Yugoslav Constitution proclaimed two main principles: freedom of conscience and religion and the separation of church and state. Both the Constitution and the Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities (1953, 1978) were more liberal than in other communist countries such as Romania or Russia. However, practice differed from these principles: while religious communities appeared to be tolerated on paper, religion in the public sphere was forbidden. Transformation of religious life during the communist era had significant influence on the life of all ethnic groups, including Romanians. Throughout the recent history, the religious identity of the Romanians in Serbia has undergone various changes. The Official statistical data from the census show that the number of Romanian Orthodox Christians has gradually been decreasing, as it can be seen from the following figures. In 1953, 87.9% out of 57,236 ethnic Romanians in Vojvodina were Orthodox Christians; in 1991, 82.4% out of 42,316 Romanians were Orthodox, while in 2002, 81.9% out of 34,576 Romanians remained Orthodox. At the same time, the number of neo-Protestants has increased from 0.7% in 1953, 2.6% in 1991, but later it decreased to 2.1% in 2002.[14] Despite the declining tendency, the number of Orthodox Romanians remains dominant in relation to the other confessions. Even though they are 'statistically' irrelevant, neo-Protestants communities are present in almost every settlement with Romanian population; new churches are founded frequently. Thus, the group of Romanian neo-Protestants is particularly interesting for examining the issue of conversion in the prevailingly Orthodox environment of their local communities and represents a unique opportunity for religious migration research, bearing in mind the high

[13] Aleksandra Đurić Milovanović,"'On the Road to Religious Freedom': a Study of the Nazarene Emigration from Southeastern Europe to North America," *Journal for Ethnography and Folklore* 1/2, 2017: 5-27.
[14] Mircea Măran, Aleksandra Đurić Milovanović, "From double to triple minorities: Romanian neo-Protestants from the Serbian Banat in the United States and Canada," *Transylvanian Review* vol. XXIV, no. 3, 2015: 88.

mobility of Romanians towards Western countries, but also towards Romania in recent years.[15] Conversion of Romanians from Serbia to neo-Protestantism is closely related to issues of migration and mobility, through missionary efforts from abroad, or while they were living abroad.

One of the key distinctive elements of the neo-Protestant identity is the emphasis on the "supra-ethnic" or "meta-ethnic" identity and openness to various ethnic groups. Due to a specific socio-cultural context and ethno-confessional structure of the northern Serbian Province of Vojvodina, I am using the term "converted co-ethnics" for Romanian neo-Protestants as "returning migrants" in their local communities. Romanian neo-Protestants may not represent a paradigmatic example of "co-ethnic migrants," since they do not return to their "ethnic homeland," "putative homeland," where they would represent a majority.[16] However, they could be treated in terms of co-ethnicity in the wider sense. These migrants return to their "homeland" Serbia (as they perceive it), joining Romanian ethnic communities, while their identities have undergone significant changes due to new religion they had adopted abroad. After they return as "converted co-ethnics," they encounter difficulties in adjustment and often feel rejected by the local community. Religious otherness among co-ethnics indicates, through perception of "converted" migrants, complex interaction between religion and ethnicity.

3. Romanian Neo-Protestants as Migrants

In the book "Sociology of Return Migration," Frank Bovenkerk stresses that "it is impossible to study return migration without first considering the emigration factors."[17] Therefore, to understand the current migration and returning among Romanian neo-Protestants, it is necessary to make a brief historical overview of the Romanian migration history in general. The first mass departures of the Romanian population, originating from the area of Serbia, to countries of Western Europe and North America are recorded at the turn of 20th century. The process of emigration has continued almost without interruption up to the

[15] On Romanian neo-Protestants from Serbia in the United States and Canada see more in: Măran, Đurić Milovanović, 2015.

[16] This argument is made from my interlocutors' perception of the "home country." Romanians in present day Serbia represent a national (autochthonous) minority. It should be mentioned that Romanians in Serbia still maintain strong affiliation to their regional Banat identity. Stressing the standpoint of interlocutors themselves I use the term "home country" or "homeland" for Serbia. (cf. Jasna Čapo Žmegač, Christian Voss, Klaus Roth, *Co-Ethnic Migration Compared. Central and Eastern European Countries* (Munchen-Berlin: Verlang Otto Sagner, 2010).

[17] Frank Bovenkerk, *The Sociology of Return Migration: a Bibliographic Essay* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974) p. 9.

present, being caused by a variety of factors. Historian Mircea Măran argues that emigration developed in several stages, which are allocated according to the socio-economic and political conditions that prevailed during the 20th century.[18] The period from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to the First World War followed by the interwar period. The first period of communism in Yugoslavia (1945–1965), period from 1965 to 1975, the economic prosperity of SFR Yugoslavia and the breakup of Yugoslavia and the economic crisis (from 1991 up to the present). In the first phase, the Romanians left *en masse* to the United States in search of work, largely as individuals and in rare cases as families. After the break during the Great War, the process continued in the interwar period, but this time, in addition to the U.S., Canada, partly Argentina and Brazil, and even Australia became the destination points. The largest number of emigrants leaving for Canada at the end of the 1920s and during the years of the Great Economic Depression went through difficult times looking for a job in a situation where many workers were unemployed worldwide. After the end of the Second World War and the establishment of the communist regime in Yugoslavia, since peasants were initially first in line to be attacked by the new regime, a large number of Romanians was in search of a way to leave the country and move to the U.S. or Canada, or to some other Western country. Illegal crossing of the Yugoslav-Italian border was one of the ways to reach the desired goal. In the mid-sixties, having realized the economic situation and the problem of the lack of jobs in the country the Yugoslav communist regime decided to allow all citizens to travel freely around the world and go looking for jobs in the countries that needed labor force. It was the moment when the largest wave of emigration of citizens of the former Yugoslavia to the West was initiated, and there were many ethnic Romanians among them. Alongside labor, the reason for emigration was also religion. The first groups of "religious migrants" among Romanians were the Nazarenes. Because of their pacifist beliefs and refusal to take oath during the First and the Second World War, many Nazarenes were condemned to severe prison sentences; some of believers emigrated to the United States, Canada and Australia.[19] In order to avoid military service, many Nazarenes tried to cross the border illegally. The majority of these 'invisible migrants' started to emigrate illegally after years of hardship and imprisonment. Decisions to emigrate were mostly taken to avoid the

[18] Mircea Măran, "Românii din Banatul sârbesc în Occident," *Europa* 2(4), 2009: 11.

[19]Back in the late 19th and early 20th century, the Nazarenes from Germany and Switzerland established communities in North America with the emigrants from the German-speaking countries. Soon, the Serbian, Romanian, Hungarian, and Slovak Nazarenes followed the German Nazarenes in search of religious freedom. More in Pfeiffer, 2010.

military service and life conditions of deep poverty and daily harassment.[20]Among the interviewed Romanian Nazarenes, some still remember how their family members suffered persecution:

> [1] It was hard. They kept my brothers in prison for a long time. After they got out, they were afraid of new punishment, so they crossed the border to Italy. There they were in camps, before they left to Australia, the United States, and Canada. Everybody left. (Nazarene, female, Mali Žam).[21]

Although after the Second World War, freedom of religion was guaranteed by the law on religious communities from 1953 and the government did not require the Nazarenes to take an oath, conflicts arose when the Nazarenes refused to participate in voting, also opposing the collectivization of property. For these reasons, in the middle of 20th century, the Nazarenes were being condemned to prison sentences and were taken to the island of *Goli Otok* (Bare Island), which was the most notorious prison in the communist Yugoslavia where mostly political prisoners were sent.[22] The disadvantageous position of the Nazarenes, from the moment they appeared in this territory, as well as during the period of communism, led to a large wave of emigration of believers, especially after 1960.[23] The emigration peaked between 1965 and 1973 when the "open borders policy" in Yugoslavia allowed people to travel freely to work abroad. As a result, Nazarene community has nearly disappeared.[24] Conflicts with the state of the other neo-Protestant community–the Seventh-day Adventists, were provoked by their demands to allow the children not to attend school and to release workers from their duties on Saturdays. The Adventists whose children did not attend school were fined and even imprisoned.[25] Emigration of the members of the Adventist community was most noticeable between 1950 and 1960. Adventist believers, often looking for jobs that do not involve work on Saturdays, went to Western Europe-primarily to Germany or Austria, but also to North America. One of the interview passages highlights the roots of conflict of Adventist believers with the local community:

> [2] I worked on a farm. One day, my superior told me that I should start working on Saturdays as well. It was unacceptable for me. I am Adventist, I don't work on Saturdays. They started to mistreat me. I simply quit my job and left to work in

[20] Bojan Aleksov, *The Dynamics of Extinction: The Nazarene Religious Community in Yugoslavia after 1945* (MA thesis) (Budapest: Central European University, 1999).
[21] All the recorded interviews are preserved in the Digital Archive of the Institute for Balkan Studies SASA.
[22] Kathleen Nenadov, *Choosing to suffer affliction: The untold story of Nazarene persecution in Yugoslavia* (K.R. Nenadov, 2006).
[23] Aleksandra Đurić Milovanović, "'On the Road to Religious Freedom': A Study of the Nazarene Emigration from Southeastern Europe to North America," *Journal for Ethnography and Folklore* 1/2, 2017: 5-27.
[24] After the Second Would War there was around 15,000 Nazarenes in Yugoslavia. In 2015 their number is around 1,000.
[25] Radmila Radić, *Država i verske zajednice* (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2002), p. 426.

> Germany. I worked as an electrician in Stuttgart. The biggest Adventist church was situated there, in Ringstraße Street, with members from all parts of Yugoslavia attending. There were also Romanians. I went there for 20 years. Later on, the church had so many members that they divided it in three locations: Stuttgart, Heilbronn and Fellbach. (Seventh-day Adventist, male, Banatsko Novo Selo/Uljma)

The role of religion in triggering migration is gaining more attention, especially in the past decades. Some studies show that Romanian emigrants (from Romania) were 95% Orthodox, while the rest were mostly Greek-Catholic and Baptist.[26] However, results of extensive field research on the religiosity of the Romanians in Serbia conducted since 2009, indicate that the other neo-Protestant communities were also prone to migration were the Adventists and the Nazarenes.[27] We can assume that the reason for an increased emigration among the members of the two communities, in addition to the economic factor, were their religious principles, which have been sanctioned by the state. In search of a 'free' society, many neo-Protestants fled from the severe religious and political persecution. As it was the case with the other neo-Protestant communities, the Romanian Pentecostals emigrated abroad in the sixties of 20th century. After going abroad, many believers participated actively in missionary activities and helped the communities in their home countries, donating money to build prayer houses or buy church buildings and to acquire religious literature and Bibles. This was especially visible in Romania and Serbia after the fall of communism. New prayer houses were built, or older ones renovated in many small rural areas of Banat. An interesting detail, stated by the Pentecostal pastor Marinike Mozor, is that the first song book in the Romanian language was printed in New York in 1972 by two Romanian believers who sent it to Serbia.[28] The Romanians belonging to Baptist communities started emigrating by going to Australia in 1959. Before the Second World War, there were no Baptist Romanian emigrants to the West, because the movement was only founded in 1930 and there was no opportunity until the war for a significant number of Baptists to emigrate to the West. Thus, emigration within the Baptist communities began only in the late fifties. From 1962 to 1963, Baptists began to immigrate in large numbers to North America.

[26] Viorel Gârdan Gabriel, Marius Eppel, "The Romanian emigration to the United States until the First World War. Revisiting opportunities and vulnerabilities," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 11(32), 2012: 263.
[27] Aleksandra Đurić Milovanović, Mirča Maran & Biljana Sikimić, *Rumunske verske zajednice u Banatu. Prilog proučavanju multikonfesionalnosti Vojvodine* (Vršac: Mihailo Palov, 2011).
[28] Marinike Mozor, *Istorija pentekostalnih crkava među pripadnicima rumunske nacionalnosti u* Banatu (Novi Sad: Biblijsko bogoslovski centar Logos, 1998) p. 13

4. "The World is my Parish": Religion and Transnational Belonging[29]

"*Emigrar para Voltar*" [Emigrate to Return], as Caroline Brettell entitled one of the chapters in her study on return migration of Portuguese immigrants, illustrates the case with many South-eastern European countries.[30] Labor or *Gastarbeiter* migration was highly present in this area of Europe especially after the Second World War."[31] The wish to return, prevalent among many *Gastarbeiters*, was also an important factor in their attempt to maintain close links with their home country to which they believed they would eventually come back."[32] Transnational ties and practices were always significant elements for maintaining close relations between the homeland and host country. For contemporary Romanian migrants in Serbia, the role of institutional religious ties in remaining connected to their home countries should not be neglected.

Two groups of Romanian neo-Protestant migrants can be distinguished: those who converted in their home country before emigration and those who converted abroad.[33] Among them there are no significant differences, except linguistically or ethnically different environments in churches they were attending abroad. Romanians who have joined neo-Protestant communities aboard actively participate in religious activities in their host countries, but also strengthen and build new networks of their religious communities upon return to their home country. The experience of conversion includes various changes in terms of social relations, ethical norms; becoming a "true believer" requires an experience of conversion, a dramatic change which implies the rediscovery of Christ and faith. Neo-Protestant theology emphasizes conversion through individual spiritual discovery, adult baptism, and a personal decision to accept Christ. By building a new identity and the new faith as born-again Christians, neo-Protestants distance themselves from traditional religions (i.e. Orthodoxy) embracing a different way of life. A change in behavior becomes a marker of the "true faith," as all neo-Protestants forbid smoking, alcohol, drugs, abortion, divorce, and sometimes certain styles of dress.[34]

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[29] John Wesley's quote (1739)

[30] Caroline Bretell, *Anthropology and Migration: Essays on Transnationalims, Ethnicity and Identity* (Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York, Oxford, Altamira Press, 2003), p. 57

[31] Biljana Sikimić, "Romanians in the Serbian Banat: Imagining Romania and the West," in Petko Hristov (ed.) *Migration and identity: historical, cultural and linguistic dimensions of mobility in the Balkans* (Sofia: Paradigma, 2012), pp. 232–245.

[32] Ulf Brunnbauer, "Labor Migration and Transnationalism in the Balkans. A Historical Perspective," in Petko Hristov (ed.) *Migration and Identity. Historical Cultural and Linguistic Dimensions of Mobility in the Balkans* (Sofia: Paradigma, 2012), p. 4.

[33] Since Romanian neo-Protestants in some cases do not return permanently (coming for seasonal stays), we cannot speak about return in the strict sense.

[34] Aleksandra Đurić Milovanović, "Serbs in Romania. Relationship between Ethnic and Religious Identity,"

A majority of my Romanian neo-Protestant informants converted upon their arrival to a host country. Sometimes they would explain that this was an expression of freedom for them, being away from their native village. Some of them come from neo-Protestant families and were living in close contact with their theology. However, stigma associated with neo-Protestants is potentially an obstacle for them to convert in their home country. Others spoke about the first encounters with other Romanian neo-Protestants while working with them abroad. Hence, religious conversion becomes an important part of their migration experience narrative. Being members of neo-Protestant communities abroad, ethnic Romanian migrants from Serbia became a part of the worldwide religious institution that accepted them as members wherever they were. The religious community had its social role for immigrants too. My informants stressed the importance of their religious identity in their integration abroad or in feeling welcomed:

> [3] We were better accepted if we were in the faith, we had much more success. Brothers from the church helped us to stabilize, find houses and jobs (Baptist, male, Vršac).
> [4] The church gave us everything we needed. One sister would provide a bed, another would provide chairs (…) and that was how we furnished our house (Seventh-day Adventist, female, Vladimirovac).

As a part of the global religious community, neo-Protestant religious practices are recognizable in many countries where they have organized church life. According to László Foszto, Evangelism or neo-Protestantism represents a culturally neutral form of Christianity.[35] Having believers from different ethnic backgrounds and holding religious services in many languages, neo-Protestants tend to be transnational and open to various cultures. Neo-Protestants consider all people from their communities to be their "brothers and sisters" (independent from believers' nationality). One of the questions that remain open is: are we talking about return migration of Romanian neo-Protestants or about creating transnational religious space of global Evangelical/neo-Protestant movements? In recent academic debates on the growing influence of Pentecostalism, scholars have stressed its global and transnational activity of this community. Although these communities work locally in terms of recruiting new members, their practices are recognizable globally. Egalitarian principle and close social relations within community are very important in attracting new members. Manuela Cantón Delgado defines narratives of coherence among Pentecostal Roma (Gypsy)

Balcanica XLIII, 2012: 117-142.

[35] László Fosztó, Denes Kiss,"Pentecostalism in Romania. The impact of Pentecostal communities on the life-style of the members," *La ricerca Folklorica* vol. 65, 2012: 51-64.

community in Spain, "which redirect the sense of belonging based on the new connections, reformulating the spaces for recognition, weaving new networks of solidarity and contributing to managing new local and regional power groups among Gypsies throughout Spain."[36] The warmth and support offered by the community are only some of the elements that have a great impact upon those who visit the congregation.[37] Regardless of whether they left as individuals or whether whole families emigrated, Romanians still have strong family ties with neo-Protestants living in their home country. During my research, I was especially interested in how migrants from Serbia get into contact with their religious fellows abroad. The network of neo-Protestant communities eventually everybody knows somebody who emigrated and who attend some of the neo-Protestant assemblies. In neo-Protestant communities abroad, religious services are usually in Romanian and English (or churches have translations). Holding religious services in various languages of their believers, neo-Protestant pastors explained that, "everybody understands the word of God in their mother tongue." As one of the informants stressed:

> [5] In Kitchener, our service is in Romanian language. Majority of members are from Romania and about 20–30 Romanians from Serbia. But there are also other nationalities. There are Arabs, and people from Latin America. We are all together. They have translation with the headsets, but we listen to the pastor in Romanian. (Pentecostal, female, Vladimirovac).

After the fall of communism many believers have had an important role in financing congregations in Serbia and Romania. Their aid has been predominantly directed towards building new prayer houses, book donations, and organization of evangelizations with educated preachers. During their seasonal stays, many of my interlocutors actively participate in religious events of their home neo-Protestant communities. As Peggy Levitt argues

> some migrants sustain long-term, long-distance membership in the religious organizations to which they belonged prior to migration. They still make significant financial contributions to those groups, raise funds to support their activities, host visiting religious leaders, seek long-distance spiritual and practical guidance from them, and participate in worship and cultural events during their return visits. Migrants may belong to host-country religious institutions that have formal ties to a home-country "sister congregation."[38]

[36]Manuela Delgado Canton, "Gypsy Pentecostalism, Ethnopolitical Uses and Construction of Belonging in the South of Spain," *Social Compass* 57(2), 2010: 256.
[37]Todor Pitulac, Sebastian Năstuță, "Choosing to be stigmatized: rational calculus in religious conversion," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 16, 2007: 86.

[38] Peggy Levitt, "You know, Abraham was really the first immigrant: religion and transnational migration," *International Migration Review*, 37(3), 2003: 851.

When returning, they actively participate in all religious activities of their "home" community: sermons, chant singing hours, baptisms, weddings, evangelizations, etc. They evidence a strong commitment to visit their home country frequently, especially during summer vacations. One Romanian Pentecostal family returned permanently, and they are now the main initiators of building a new church in one of the villages. They organize free English language classes for children and various events for youth. In 2016, this community organized an evangelization meeting in the village with pastors from Korea. Their transnational religious networks involve higher mobility of neo-Protestants who could be seen as transmitters of new religious ideas and practices--or as Levitt define "social remittances."[39]

5. "You Go There Where God Calls You": Religious Belonging and Boundary Making

Upon coming from abroad, Romanian neo-Protestant migrants often experience different attitudes about their acceptance in their local communities. This is especially noticeable if they renovate church buildings or build new ones. The following interview fragment given by a Pentecostal woman from the Romanian village of Markovac who has lived abroad for more than 40 years. She became a member of the Pentecostal Church while living and working in Sweden. In this interview fragment she explains to the researcher that any thought of acquiring material wealth was totally unacceptable:

> [6] I am so glad, my lady, when I can hear the word of God, lady, when it is in Romanian language I understand, and I go. They are Pentecostals, lady. Those who speak in tongues(…)We, my lady, we have to be the all the same, because we don't take anything, we will die and everything will remain, I see, my lady, my dear, what to say, I have been there almost for forty years, what have I earned there in Sweden, can I show you? (Pentecostal, female, Markovac).[40]

Serbian ethno-linguist Biljana Sikimić points out the attitude of the Romanian local community towards interlocutors' seasonal stays in the village and the differences between the adopted culture and the traditional attitudes of the local community[41]:

> [7] My Orthodox neighbors say to me that our faith is invented, that it is brought from abroad. But I believe in the same God they do and in the Lord Jesus. (Baptist, female, Vršac)
> [8] It is not the tradition in the village. If you go to a Pentecostal church, you are

[39] Peggy Levitt, "Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-level Forms of Cultural Diffusion," *International Migration Review*, 32(4), 1998: 9326–948.
[40] The interviewer was Dr Biljana Sikimić, ethno-linguist from SASA Institute for Balkan Studies. The interview was conducted as a part of the research project "Ethnic and Social Stratification of the Balkans" (2006–2010) and it is preserved in Digital Archive of the Institute for Balkan Studies (DABI).
[41] Sikimić, "Romanians in the Serbian Banat," p. 238.

> retarded. But in Canada, as well as in Romania, it is not like that. Whole families are together with children at assemblies. (Pentecostal, female, Vladimirovac)
> [9] Young people think if you are in an assembly, nobody wants you. You will not get married or have children. But God hasn't abandoned anyone. He has plans for everyone. (Seventh-day Adventist, female, Vladimirovac)
> [10] One of my Orthodox neighbors told me "Don't go with the Pentecostals. They speak the devil's language". (Pentecostal, female, Kuštilj)

As it is evident from the example [8] *it is not "tradition in the village"* to belong to any other religious group except the Orthodox one; the departure from Orthodoxy leads to marginalization of individuals, i.e. [9] *nobody wants you*. Thus, conversation about the "other," religiously different co-ethnic instigates the problem of negative tagging and rejection by the community on the surface. It could be said that Romanian neo-Protestantism challenges "desirable" identity and local appearance of "homogenous" Orthodox community. Even though they share the same ethnic identity, Romanian neo-Protestants are often marginalized, excluded as "foreigners" in terms of religion and negatively marked as members of "sects."

> [11] Our mentality doesn't allow us to go to the church. You feel ashamed to go in your native village. So, when people go abroad, they are finally free to attend the church, be baptized and live their life as Christians. (Nazarene, male, Vršac)
> [12] When I came back one summer from Kitchener, it was Sunday and I was going to the assembly. One man told me, "All the people from the village go to the center of the village, only you go to the outskirts of the village." And I simply replied to him, "You go there, where God calls you". (Pentecostal, female, Vladimirovac)

Many neo-Protestant communities are not newly established and have a long history in the villages, but the existing stereotypes towards them are present and recognizable in the public discourse of the local communities. Even though ethnic identity has distinctive characteristics differentiating it from other forms of identities, including religious, these two identities frequently overlap.[42] The intertwinement of religious and ethnic identity among Romanians is highly present, identifying Romanian ethnicity and Orthodox religion. For Romanian neo-Protestants, religion becomes a distinctive element that differentiates them from the Orthodox majority.

> [13] The problem is that they, neo-Protestants, don't want to know anything outside their church. They only hear their pastor and they literary interpret the Bible. They don't accept anything else. It doesn't mean if you are Baptist and try to make good works you will be saved. It's hard if you don't have liturgy, sacrifice. Through the sacrifice, you show God's presence. And they only have exaggerated stories.

[42]Aleksandra Đurić Milovanović, "*How long have you been in the truth?* Expressing new forms of religiosity": Romanian neo-Protestants in Serbia," *Ethnologia Balkanica* 16(1), 2012: 132.

(Orthodox, male, Vršac)

Distancing from and not participating in, for example, the local Orthodox feasts of the village patron saint's day, Romanian folklore celebrations or Orthodox funerals, Romanian neo-Protestants are no longer seen as "true representatives of their own ethnic group." Fosztó and Kiss give an example of Adventist parents in one Hungarian community in Romania: "they refused to dress their children in folk dresses or to allow them to sing folk songs, thus scandalizing the local Hungarian community which sees this gesture as disloyalty to the ethnic group".[43]

[14] They will forget who they are. If you don't respect your past, how can you have future? Our customs remind us who we are, that we are Romanians. (Orthodox, male, Banatsko Novo Selo)

By abandoning the "predominant" religion of their ethnic minority community in Serbia, these "converted co-ethnics" have made a break with the past, as if reborn, and have changed their socio-cultural relations as well. The ethnic sense of their identity is weakening; however, their identification through the Romanian language has significant influence on their Romanian identity. The question is whether the sense of belonging to the Romanian ethnic community is based on linguistic identity, rather than on the Orthodox religion and tradition, will be as strong in the third or fourth generation of neo-Protestants. Since identities are not static but continuously being (de- and re-) constructed, the process of identity construction requires permanent processes of bordering and "othering."[44]

When Romanian neo-Protestants return, or arrive for seasonal stays as "converted," they come with a developed sense of their new religious and cultural identity, creating and defining new relations within their own ethnic, but religiously different group. An emphasis on social hierarchy entails uncovering the local patterns of distribution of resources, power, and prestige, as affected by conversion and return. Conversion to neo-Protestantism is a matter of personal choice which offers a new form of an alternative Christian tradition, insisting on strict morality and, quite frequently, conservatism in practicing the tenets of faith. Researching Romanian Pentecostal migrants in Italy, Cingolani argues, "the structure and doctrine of these groups places great importance on the transnational cohesion of worshippers and this gives rise to close-knit networks of economic, social and cultural exchanges within

[43] László Fosztó, Denes Kiss, "Pentecostalism in Romania:The impact of Pentecostal communities on the life-style of the members," *La ricerca Folklorica* vol. 65, 2012) 63.
[44] Houtum H. van & Naerssent T. van, "Bordering, Ordering, and Othering," *Journal of Economic and Social Geography* (93), 2, 2002: 63.

the groups–an area which definitely merits further study."[45] This is also the case with neo-Protestant spreading among Romanian minority in Serbia, as well as among other ethnic groups in the region. Nevertheless, their local manifestations and intra-group perception by their co-ethnics has its specificities that need to be researched as unique case studies.

6. Concluding Remarks

Conversion to neo-Protestantism among different ethnic groups living in the areas of northern Serbia was present during different historical periods of the 20th century; it was always accompanied with migration and mobility of believers and preachers. Although conversion to neo-Protestantism is not a new phenomenon for members of the Romanian ethnic minority in Serbia, it has been in close connection with migration processes, especially in the last decades. In this paper, I have tried to show the dynamics of a specific type of return migration of the Romanian neo-Protestants and the influence of their religious identity change in the local communities. The Romanian ethnic minority was chosen as a case study due to the considerable presence in neo-Protestant communities in Serbia. For those Romanian neo-Protestant migrants who return to Serbia, conversion has its role in this returning process, especially for missionary programs and church planting. Newly converted Romanians have acquired theological knowledge abroad, but also practical skills in organizing community life in more modern ways. Offering various programs for youth in their local communities (summer camps, free English language classes, musical festivals) they have significant impact of developing new relations with their co-ethnics.

Using several examples from my collected fieldwork, I stress how religious "otherness" opens different questions on the attitude of Romanian local population towards "converted" co-ethnic migrants. Their neo-Protestant religious identity has significant influence on boundary making with predominantly Orthodox Romanians who perceive neo-Protestant religious and cultural practices as "alienated" and influenced by factors "brought from abroad." This newly emerging form of collective identification of the Romanian neo-Protestants is sometimes accompanied with stereotyping and intra-group tensions in their local communities. Similar examples can be encountered in other ethnic or religious minority groups as well, so the question that remains open is the change of their religious identities in consequence of their migration/return status. Based on this research, I argue that future research on both ethnic and religious communities and migration induce the need to look into

[45] Pietro Cingolani, "The Romanians in Italy," *Transnational Communities in Globalized World*, 2009, p. 20.

multiple ways of belonging and rethink social boundaries of both individuals and groups in post-communist societies. This micro-level study induces the need for further research of both ethnic and religious minority mobility in Europe as well as the transformations of intra-group relations due to religious identity changes after the fall of communism.